

Answering the Call

On **Sept. 11, 2001**, time seemed to stop. While others were raising questions, there was no question for one Soldier on what he had to do:

Volunteer

Story by Andrew Stamer

Selfless service may have earned Capt. Craig “Kush” Kushniruk the Bronze Star Medal while he was deployed to Afghanistan, but it was his volunteerism that landed him in Europe District.

Like so many people, Kushniruk watched in horror as Sept. 11, 2001 unfolded unlike any day. Feelings of frustration welled up inside of him,

but instead of feeling paralyzed by the sight, he did what he knew he had to do.

It’s not just because he’s a native New Yorker from Buffalo that made him act. He knew he couldn’t sit back when the threat of freedom was something to fight for. So, at age 40 and eligible for retirement, Kushniruk volunteered. He was assigned to Europe District in March of 2003 and sent to Afghanistan.

“My big reason for coming on active-duty was because I was in the infantry and an engineer officer. I thought I could do some good,” said Kushniruk who enlisted in the Marine Corps when he was 17 years old.

Watching the events of 9/11 unfold is something few can explain – eyes fill with tears quicker than words flow from a mouth. Kushniruk could do no better but express his frustration at what had happened and what he should do. His wife, Kristine Kushniruk, even knew he couldn’t sit this one out, and encouraged her husband to fight the good fight. It was his children who drove him to his decision to volunteer.

“My oldest child is 17, so

they’re right at that age,” said Kushniruk who speaks selflessly of the sacrifices he made to save younger people from having to go to war.

And Kushniruk sacrificed approximately 20 months from his family – a year of it spent in Afghanistan.

His time in Afghanistan was spent wearing many hats. He was the resident engineer at the Bagram Joint Operations Center, a liaison between the CJ-7 and the Corps of Engineers, project engineer and construction representative, as well as pulling security for the civilians and contractors.

“I was basically the person on point, so if something were to happen, I’d have to react to it,” said Kushniruk.

Working the 12- to 14- hour days were both challenging and rewarding, said Kushniruk.

“It was nice because the busier you kept the faster the time went,” he said. And there were always projects to be done.

After 30 years of war, Afghanistan was littered with landmines.

“No matter where you’d excavate you’d always end up coming up with UXO (unexploded ordinances), landmines and other stuff,” said Kushniruk.

This hit home quickly when he would see children and adults who were missing arms and legs from landmines.

When they’d excavate and find ordinances, the engineers would call in the EOD (explosive ordinance disposal) or the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization), who would clear it. The NGO would also help by training the Afghan people on how to identify what was dangerous and how to remove and dispose of it properly, said Kushniruk.

The Corps of Engineers were helping in a different way – by building a working infrastructure, and being witness to the good being done.

On a detail to take a U.S. dignitary back to the Kabul International Airport, Kushniruk said he

The Combined Joint Task Force-180, took over responsibility for all Afghan operations at the beginning of June 2002.

Photo illustration by Andrew Stamer

remembers seeing the street lights come on for the first time.

“It was just neat as things started working again and being able to witness it,” said Kushniruk.

During his year in Afghanistan, Kushniruk witnessed many good changes.

There is a generation of Afghans who are relatively uneducated, with no, or minimal, trade skills. Kushniruk said because of this, he was trying to get more local national employees hired to do the construction because it would help teach them trades and help them learn.

“The more we do the more it’s going to help,” said Kushniruk.

And now the Corps has more of an opportunity to teach workers because more reconstruction projects are being done such as wells, dams, power, schools, and hospitals.

“I think the more we get out and do the small projects with the PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams), it is going to show we’re there to help, not that we’re occupying the country,” said Kushniruk.

While building bases for the Afghan National Army are helpful in providing security and stability, Kushniruk’s ambition was doing more civil projects for the people. When the Corps begins construction on a military base, if they would help the people who live in the surrounding villages with projects like wells, it would serve to help everyone.

“If they see that we’re helping, then they’re going to watch the base and make sure things stay safe. They look out for you,” said Kushniruk.

He has high hopes for Afghanistan.

“I think we’re doing a lot of good. I’ve seen the good that we’ve done in Afghanistan and how appreciative the people are,” he said.



Photo by Andrew Stamer